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Breaking New Ground in Ohio Agriculture
By Robert J. Boggs
Director of the Ohio Department of Agriculture

If you didn't know what went on at the Ohio Department of Agriculture's complex of buildings outside the city limits of Reynoldsburg, you would never be able to guess from the red brick exterior. Most people are amazed to find out that these buildings comprise a lab safety network that hosts a flurry of scientific activity from analyzing everyday food and milk products found on store shelves, to testing for deadly diseases like anthrax, West Nile virus, and avian influenza.

In fact, several hundred scientists and inspectors at the Ohio Department of Agriculture are silently safeguarding the health of Ohio's consumers, environment, animals, and plants.

American astronomer and scientist Dr. Carl Sagan remarked once that advances in medicine and agriculture have saved vastly more lives than have been lost in all the wars in history. In Ohio we are doing our part to break new ground in agriculture to help protect lives and advance the industry, and 2008 was a benchmark year.

Last January, we were awarded our first-ever U.S. patent for work completed at our nationally-accredited Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory in association with the isolation and molecular characterization of Equine Herpes Virus type 1. This virus was involved in a large equine disease outbreak at the University of Findlay several years ago. The patent includes rights to a vaccine and vaccine development for this deadly disease. This accomplishment is a reflection of the caliber of our scientific staff that provides regulatory testing support for disease control programs and diagnostic laboratory services for veterinarians, livestock farmers, and agribusinesses.

As the threat posed by various diseases to our nation's livestock sector continues to grow, our critical role in protecting humans and our food supply can not be overstated. In 2008, lab staff recorded the first finding of Tularemia in two cats in Kettering. This is the first report of this agent found in domesticated animals in Ohio. Tularemia is a potentially deadly disease to humans that can be transmitted by handling infected animals and is usually associated with wild rabbits and rodents.

Many people may be surprised to know that Ohio Department of Agriculture food safety inspectors work in conjunction with local health departments to make sure the food we eat is free of dangerous pathogens. In 2008, our food safety staff helped educate personnel at local health departments on changes to the Ohio Uniform Model Food Code and partnered with other state and local agencies on a large-scale effort to remove contaminated ground beef, potato salad, and macaroni salad distributed in Ohio.



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At the same time, state meat inspectors provided daily examinations to 208 Ohio-based establishments. Of those, 31 establishments daily provide more than 85,000 meals to senior citizens, charter schools, head start programs and daycare facilities. Staff continued checking for *E. coli* O157:H7 in beef production facilities and for *Listeria monocytogenes* in ready-to-eat meats. In 2008, *e. coli* samples from state-inspected facilities yielded negative results and the presence of *Listeria* declined 63 percent.

In 2008, Ohio's dairy industry produced 5 billion pounds of milk due to better genetics and herd management. This is the first time the state produced this amount of milk since the mid-1960s. The amazing feat was that this goal was achieved with only 276,000 cows—half as many as in 1965.

The Ohio Department of Agriculture's Consumer Analytical Laboratory, which tests dairy products, raw and processed meats, vegetables, fruits, drinking water, and dairy process water for bacteria that cause foodborne illness, was awarded several federal grants in 2008. These grants helped secure the lab's position as a nationally recognized emergency testing facility. The Food and Drug Administration will provide nearly \$1 million in equipment and \$350,000 in annual funding for personnel and supplies to position the lab as part of the national Food Emergency Response Network (FERN). The goal of FERN is to increase the national capacity to respond to chemical emergencies and emerging concerns including melamine contamination of food products. The Consumer Analytical Lab was also awarded a U.S. EPA grant to test commercial disinfectants for formulation and microbial efficacy. Ours was one of only three labs in the nation selected for this program, which verifies the effectiveness of commercially available hospital disinfectants against a variety of bacterial infectious agents and spores.

And to add to the department's state-of-the-art laboratory network, a new Plant Pathology Laboratory will be completed in early 2009. With globalism, we are subject to many new challenges that could devastate the plant industry and hamper commerce. As you know, invasive species, such as Emerald Ash Borer, Gypsy Moth, Sudden Oak Death, and others, pose a serious threat. The new lab, along with our services, will go a long way toward protecting Ohio's plant interests from pests and diseases.

As we usher in 2009, let us remember the year ahead will bring many challenges, including maintaining current and seeking additional high levels of accreditation; continually improving operations and response to emergencies by working with other state agencies, commodity groups, and federal partners; and identifying new private, state, or federal opportunities to increase revenue sources. But consumers should know that the Ohio Department of Agriculture will continue on its quest to break new agricultural ground to help protect lives and advance the state's strong agriculture industry.

